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Life and the Well-Balanced Man

BY MAXIM GORKY



THE world will surely agree with me when I say that inordinate development of the intellect weakens the capacity for feeling, and that the very instinct of life itself may be undermined by such development. For the mind, although not parasitic, is planted upon this instinct, in the fertile soil of the primary impulses; it is nourished by their juices, it holds within them its roots, and in a normal nature it unites naturally with them and becomes a necessary attribute of man in his strivings toward the realization of his self. An excessive development of the purely rational powers should therefore be checked, in order that these powers should not outstrip the man himself. For, in the last analysis, man is but the incarnation of the life-instinct, and to place a limitation upon the development of his less instinctive faculties is necessary for self-preservation. Therefore if, from some unknown cause, the proper point in the development of the reason be passed, the equilibrium of character is destroyed and man becomes his own antagonist. He endeavors to break away from himself simply because his reason is in tense contradiction to his feelings.

This is a strange thought. "But," it may be asked, "what if this excessive development of sheer intellect produces a Kant? What will you say then?"

What shall I say? I shall say that Kant was a very pitiable, miserable man, for he knew nothing of life beyond his own philosophy. And yet, even Kant, pitiable as he was, surrounded always by pure metaphysics and perhaps never conscious of the reality of life, was, after all, a sacrifice to us in our endeavors to fathom life's secret. His misfortune is our benefit, our pride and our glory. Certainly such people are necessary, but that does not prevent me from regarding them as I do. It is positively necessary to be a Spinoza and not a human being in order to derive one's highest pleasure from the contemplation of spiders devouring one another. I do not regard such sages as human beings. I cannot. I may wonder at the dynamic quality of their thought, I may even reverence their genius, but I cannot consider a man of overbalanced development as an ideal for humanity.

Kant and Spinoza were only enormous heads. Life requires a harmonized being, one in whom intellect and feeling exist in proper proportion. The ideal human being is one in whom all the faculties are present in the right degree, and, blending with one another, will always and in all conditions make full and complete any impression of life. Such a nature would be not only wise but kind, not solely all-reasoning but also fully emotional.

This equipment is absolutely necessary if one would take a firm hold on life and exert his activities to the utmost. It enables us likewise to adapt ourselves to life's conditions as they change with the development of the ego.

Let us acknowledge that an abnormal development of intellect is natural only to exceptional individuals. Let us pay tribute to the genius of these men if we find it necessary, but let us also pity them from the depths of our souls.

It is well known that those people who are known as "thinkers" are often reproached for their passiveness, their flabbiness. It has been said that they are people of word and thought but not of deed, that their influence upon life is insignificant, and that, in general, they are worthless material for the upbuilding of new life upon this earth. And we must at least admit the possibility of the truth of such a charge. At least, such an accusation is wholesome, and we should allow it the more since it is oftenest made by those who belong to the "thinkers" themselves. It is thus self-condemnation, fiery, cruel, but always sincere. Their intentions, they say, at least many of them, are honest. There are streams of talk but not a grain of action. No, perhaps there are some grains. All periodicals, novels, articles, these are grains, actually grains—nothing more. Some

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among them write, others read, and having read, debate and then—forget what they have read. And through it all their ideals remain stagnant, if indeed they do not vanish altogether. They have the appearance of persons just returned from a great feast when, in reality, there was no feasting at all.

What is life to them? A feast? No. Labor? No. A battle? Oh, no. Life is to many of them something dreary, exhausting, misty, a sort of burden. They bear it panting with exhaustion and complaining of its weight. Do they like to live? Have they any love for life? How strange such questions sound to their ears! They like to read, to debate; they love to contemplate the future. But it is a platonic love, a fruitless love.

Life—that beautiful process of the unfolding of ideas, the acquirement of beauty and wisdom, that endless creation of new forms, that mysterious process, deeply interesting and joyous, yes joyous—life they do not love. They love something particular, something created by themselves, but that something is not the ideal of a new life.

Many of us do not know life. In childhood we spend a few years learning to read and write, then a little later we settle down each in our corner and exist thereafter upon our imaginations. We feed too much on literature instead of the wholesome food of immediate impression. But when life sarcastically flings in our faces one of its myriad contradictions, we at once take up a book in order to see what is said there in regard to the matter. Ah, yes, we think we are very clever, and are becoming still more so, but at the same time we are becoming more passive. The impressions of life rouse in our souls not a resounding, hearty echo, but merely a weary vibration.

We live in colonies, in sects, and we rarely visit save in the house of a partisan. We do not often invite heretics to our houses. We hold ourselves narrowly aloof, and cultivate an indifference to people who think differently from us.

This intellectual aristocracy is injurious. In it there lurks something which seems suspicious to me. I will not conceal from you what I think of it. I believe that it is actually the fear of life. It is as though we are in doubt of the power and usefulness of our arms and our ability to use them. We fear lest our cherished beliefs, coming into collision with life, will be shattered against the rocks of what we regard as ignorance and prejudice.

Let us feel so no longer. We must live. Life is a beautiful possibility and we must strive to live long and well, in health and in happiness. I am positive that even the trees, as they grow, experience a delight in the process of being. How much more delightful life should be to us! Surely it is always possible for a being endowed with consciousness to draw some deep, strong joy from the stormy sea of life.

It is false that life is gloomy, it is false that in it there are only wounds and groans, misery and tears. Even in its gloomiest aspect there are things noble and beautiful.

All wounds received in battle for the rights of humanity, for the opening of paths leading to justice and freedom, are honorable wounds.

Even among the groans that ascend from the struggle there resound the splendid cries of fallen heroes calling for vengeance! In the stream of tears there are tears of joy.

Life has its vulgarities, but it has also its heroisms. It contains uncleanness, but it contains also the pure, the inspiring and the beautiful.

If life does not contain everything that man can desire, he alone has the force that can create the things that life has not. If this force is weak to-day, it can become strong to-morrow. Life is beautiful, life is sublime. It is the indomitable movement toward universal happiness and joy. Even in squalor and misery, where the currents of life flow sluggishly in a dark, thick stream, there sparkle precious bits of magnanimity, wisdom, heroism. And beauty is also there. Wherever man is, there is also good. It is in grains, in small seeds, that is true, but nevertheless it is there. And even the tiniest seeds do not all perish. They grow and blossom and will bring forth fruit each after its kind.

Believe me that man everywhere carries God with him, and wherever and whatever he may be he will always remain human, and for humanity there awaits a future of great brightness.

